DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 058 EA 018 818

AUTHOR	Williams, David L., Jr.; Chavkin, Nancy Feyl
TITLE	Strengthening Parent Involvement.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	May 86
CONTRACT	400-83-0007-P2
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publication Sales, National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 ($2.50 prepaid; quantity discounts; Virginia residents add 4 percent sales tax).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
JOURNAL CIT	Streamlined Seminar; v4 n5 May 1986
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Role; *Cooperative Programs; Elementary Education; Inservice Education; *Parent Participation; *Parent Role; *Parent School Relationship; *Parent Student Relationship; *Principals

ABSTRACT

Recent studies have verified Secretary of Education William Bennett's observation on the importance of home and family life. The most successful students are those whose parents become actively engaged in the educational process at home and at school. To capitalize on potential parent involvement, principals need to understand the kinds of contributions parents want to make; become familiar with parents' availability, interests, knowledge, and skills; and develop a collaborative, nurturing environment that breaks down traditional barriers. A 1980 Southwest Educational Development Laboratory study launched a 6-year survey of over 4,000 educators and 3,000 parents in six states. Results suggest that elementary school principals support the general idea of parental participation, but are less sanguine about its breadth and scope; most favor traditional parental roles (participating in open house functions, serving as school chaperones, and so forth). Principals were less supportive of parental assistance with governance and decision-making functions. Survey results analysis led to developing several instruments linking parent involvement with school improvement strategy and a set of recommendations for principals. Improving parent involvement is directly related to principals' attitudes and sincerity, the range of involvement opportunities, and the type of school environment. (MLH)

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STREAMLINED SEMINAR

Volume 4, Number 5 May 1986

ED274058

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Strengthening Parent Involvement

David L. Williams and Nancy Feyl Chavkin

Said Secretary of Education William Bennett: "The only other educational institution that is arguably more important than the elementary school—the one that I believe to be the most critical educational institution of all—is the home and family."

One study after another has verified the Secretary's point: The most successful students are those whose parents become actively engaged in the educational process, perhaps chiefly at home but to an important degree at the school itself as well.

That proposition represents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to capitalize on the enormous—and relatively untapped—resource that parent involvement represents. The opportunity is to use this resource to make schooling in the United States more effective than ever before.

David L. Williams, Jr., is director, School Improvement Resources Group at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas.

Nancy Feyl Chavkin is research associate, School Improvement Resources Group at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas.

To take advantage of the potential gains that a school/parent partnership offers, principals must begin by understanding and appreciating the nature of the contributions parents stand ready to make. This in turn means becoming familiar with parents' availability, their interests, and their knowledge and skills. It also calls on principals to develop an environment that nurtures and enhances collaboration, and in doing so, breaks down the traditional barriers that have tended to exclude parents from mainstream involvement in the education process.

Studies of parents' perceptions about being involved in their children's schools have been sparse and inconclusive, and even fewer efforts have focused on gaining an understanding of what elementary school principals perceive the role of parents to be. One inevitable result is that comparisons of how members of the two groups view the matter have not been possible, with the further result that there has been no firm basis on which to plan and initiate collaboration.

Parent involvement survey

In 1980 the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) launched a six-year Parent Involvement in Education Project with funding from the National Institute of Education. The study has included a survey of more than 4,000 educators and 3,000 parents in SEDL's service region—Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Among other things, the survey sought opinions about parent involvement in general, about parent involvement in school decision making, about appropriate parent involvement roles, and about what parent involvement really means in everyday practice at the elementary school level.

Among the 726 elementary principals responding to the survey, there was strong agreement that teachers are more and more being called on to assume responsibilities that traditionally have rested with parents, and the principals also agreed that

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they should be providing teachers with some rather explicit parent involvement guidelines. Perhaps more to the point, the principals indicated strong disagreement with any contention that teachers have enough to do without also having to work with parents, and that in any case they do not need any special training in this area. Most of the principals felt that on the contrary, a course on working with parents should be required for undergraduates in elementary education.

The principals strongly agreed with the proposition that parents who have had experience with assisting in the classroom tend to become far more involved in their children's learning. There was consensus that getting working parents and low-income families involved in the schools remains a vexing challenge, though it was also agreed that most parents are cooperative with teachers and want their children to "do well."

With regard to appropriate involvement roles for parents, principals indicated that those of "Making sure children do their homework," "Attending school activities," "Serving as home tutors," "Being active supporters of the school program," and in effect "Becoming co-learners" with teachers and other school staff were the ones they favored most. The principals opposed any suggestion that parents should evaluate teachers and principals, and while they disagreed with the idea that parents today have too much of a voice in school decisions, they also disagreed with the proposition that parents should have the final say in such decisions.

Asked to identify the areas in which parent input would be *most* useful, the principals indicated that these were: resolution of situations in which family problems were affecting school performance; determination of whether children should be placed in special education; providing sex role instruction; having input into the amount of homework assigned; and taking part in the formulation of desegregation/integration plans.

Decisions for which principals considered parent input *least* useful included making teacher assignments within a school and the hiring and firing of school staff. Principals also saw parent input as not useful in decisions about evaluating teacher performance, selecting teaching methods, and determining school budget priorities.

Major differences exist re what roles for parents are seen as appropriate.

When principals' ratings of the perceived usefulness of parent involvement in school decision making are compared to parents' interests in participating in those same decisions, some illuminating differences emerge. For example, as Figure 1 demonstrates, parents are much more interested in participating in school governance decisions than principals are in having them do so.

Given a list of possible parent involvement activities and asked to indicate which were most typical in their schools, the principals cited the following:

- attending "open house" functions,
- participating in parent/teacher conferences about children's progress,
- serving as chaperon for school trips and events,
- organizing fund-raisers to support school needs, and
- giving children at-home assistance with school assignments.

Those activities listed as least typical included:

- having a role in school staff hiring and firing,
- taking part in the evaluation of school staff,
- taking part in the evaluation of students,
- having a voice in school budget planning, and
- helping to develop the school's curriculum.

Overall, the survey results suggest that elementary school principals support the general idea of parent involvement but are less sanguine about its breadth and scope, indicating greatest support for the more traditional roles. They were less supportive of non-traditional parent involvement—e.g., shared decision making in matters typically considered as the domain of school staff, a point of view supported by the preponderance of traditional parent involvement activities reported by other participants in the survey.

Figure 1
School Decisions:
Parent Interest Versus Principal Usefulness

Decisions	Parents' Interest N = 3103	Principals' Usefulness N = 726
evaluating principal and teachers	72.3%	23.5%
hiring principal	50.0%	11.7%
firing principal	43.8%	11.7%
setting grading rules	74.1%	41.4%
evaluating own children's learning	82.0%	31.8%

However, results from both the principal survey and from a complementary survey of parents clearly indicate that both groups have a strong interest in parent involvement in education but that they tend to interpret that "involvement" in sharply different ways.

Recommendations for action

Review and analysis of the survey results led to the development of several instruments aimed at making parent involvement a fundamental strategy for school improvement. One such instrument is a set of guidelines and strategies for use by staff development directors and by preservice and inservice teacher educators in designing courses and training activities that can help elementary teachers make more effective use of parents as educational partners. These can be obtained from SEDL's Office of Institutional Communications and Development, 211 East 7th Street, Austin, Texas 78701.

Another is the following set of recommendations for on-line principals who want to be more successful in getting parents more involved in the education of their children, both at home and at school:

• Principals would advisedly begin by lifting their sights above the bounds of traditional ways of looking at parent involvement. They need to be aware that parents are interested in just about the entire gamut of issues affecting education in general and their children's school in particular, and that they are capable of making valuable contributions. The depth and intensity of such interest will of course vary among different subgroups of parents and at different schools, but it exists—waiting to be taken advantage of—among all of them.

• Principals need to establish an atmosphere in which parent involvement is considered as an integral part of the educational process for both teachers and parents. It should also be viewed as developmental in nature. As such, principals should keep in mind that most parents will initially seek participation in the more traditional kinds of activities, the ones they are accustomed to, but that the tendency will be for their interest to become increasingly more sophisticated, and that their skills and perceptions will be sharper and keener as they derive success and satisfaction from their contributions. Principals also will need to remember that other parents can begin with higher levels of involvement, and that some may broaden their participation to the point that they have a schoolwide, districtwide, or even statewide impact. (e.g., Arizona's current chief state school officer began her connection with education as a member of the PTA).

Mutually developed and understood ground rules are basic to success.

• Principals will achieve far more effective and useful participation if they work with parents and teachers to develop a mutually understood definition of parent involvement, along with clear statements about the roles of parents and what their involvement in school affairs is *for*—i.e., the purposes and goals. Such statements should fortify the basic tenet that parents have a crucial and valued part to play in their children's academic success and personal achievement.

• Going beyond goals, principals should advocate and help develop written, districtwide policies that allow parents to become involved at all levels of their children's education both at home and at school. For parent involvement to achieve its potential—with parents becoming part of the action—it will be necessary for superintendents, central office staff, school board members, and officials of state education agencies to be fully supportive of the concept that parents are partners in the school's work.

• Principals should arrange for inservice training and staff development opportunities in the area of parent involvement—for teachers and for themselves as well.

• Principals should take the initiative in asking parents what roles they would like to play in the schooling of their children, and should have some specific suggestions about how this can be accomplished. Survey results show that parents share a wider range of interests than most principals recognize or deem useful. Principals need to identify these interests and incorporate them into the school's educational plans.

• Responding to survey results that indicate a wide range of parent interests and skills, principals should make a special, sustained effort to inform parents of the variety of opportunities the school offers for making a significant contribution to their children's education—at home and also at school. For this to be more than a pro forma exercise, principals will need to be sensitive to such matters as individual parent's skill levels, available time, work schedules, and the kinds of activities they would like to take part in. The school's parent involvement program must then be planned and developed to accommodate this range of parent characteristics.

• Principals should make appropriate resources available to initiate

and sustain a well-planned, well-organized parent involvement effort. Among other things, this means assigning appropriate staff, resources, and funds. Such arrangements are necessary not only to provide stability to the effort but to demonstrate the importance principals attach to it.

- Principals need to encourage teachers to establish a system of regular communications with parents and of sharing ideas on how parents might most effectively work with them on homework as well as on other school-related matters.
- Principals need to make students as well as parents fully aware that the school regards parents as partners and as such they are encouraged not only to visit the school but to participate as partners in the overall school program.
- As part of their "selling" effort, principals need to devote major attention to the elimination of real and imagined communication barriers between parents and the school by organizing opportunities for parents and teachers to really get to know one another and to launch collaborative undertakings.

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In analyzing the responses to the parent and principal surveys, it is clear that whatever the differences of opinion between principals and parents regarding what parent involvement should mean, they are firmly united in the feeling that such involvement is valuable. The responses further indicate that successful parent involvement is heavily dependent on the extent to which principals encourage it, allocate specific staff and financial resources to support it, create an environment that encourages it, and develop staff attitudes that sustain it.

The improvement of parent involvement in schools appears to be directly and inescapably related to such matters as

- the feelings and attitudes expressed by the principal,
- how sincerely and effectively the principal encourages involvement,
- the range of involvement opportunities that are provided for parents,
- how well these opportunities accommodate parents' needs, interests, and availability in the face of other obligations, and
- the extent to which the school environment encourages parents to take an active role.

There is no question that parent involvement represents an exceptionally powerful (and relatively untested) way of making schools more effective, and of dramatically enriching children's academic experiences.

It will not happen, however, unless the schools—all schools—organize themselves in such a way as to *make* it happen. It will be necessary, as the survey findings indicated, to provide teachers with special parent involvement training. It would also be useful—perhaps necessary—to offer training to parents. And many K-6 principals may need to undergo some far-reaching adjustments—particularly in their expectations and in reaching out beyond traditional relationships between the home and school.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract number 40-83-007, P-2. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of NIE, the Department, or other agency of the U.S. Government. November 30, 1985.

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(ISSN 0735-0023)
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Volume 4, Number 5, May 1986

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